# Shadowrun for New GMs

## *Or: How to Learn to Stop Worrying and Love the Game*

### Mission Statement

This isn't here to teach you the rules. This is here to help you become a decent Shadowrun GM. As the game gets more popular, a lot more groups will want to try it, but some poor sonovabitch is going to have to run it, with no experience in the world. This is here to help.

### The Meta:

### Previous RPG Experience

If you have previous TTRPG experience (probably D&D), don't try to compare it. Shadowrun plays so very differently than other games. There's a lot more focus on lateral thinking, and less of a linear storyline. You're given an objective, but frequently not more than that, and it's up to the players to work to their strengths to get the job done. It's also much more morally ambiguous, where tough decisions have to be made, and above all, maintaining a professional reputation. Runs aren't built like a dungeon, where everything is made to challenge the players but not kill them, and there are certain encounters they have to complete. If the players fuck up, they'll find themselves on the wrong end of a Tir Ghost's rifle, or being used to test biodrone mechanics on metahumans. As GM, you play the world like a character. If they set off an alarm and piss around, there's gonna be an HTR team that has been trained by whatever mega specifically to kill Shadowrunners. It's their job. And they're VERY good at it.

### Which Edition

There's a bunch of different answers to this. Generally, 5th edition is the most popular, because it's the latest edition. The matrix overhaul can be confusing, but is generally preferred to 4th edition. It also starts players at a lower power level, but favors magic slightly (there are ways around this, discussed below in Rules). Most of what is covered in the document will be relevant to 5th edition, but not much has changed.

4th edition has more of a high tech feeling, with the starting power level of players about on par with a well-trained soldier. It also has all of the supplement books out, and the matrix system makes hacking viable for most characters (whether this is good or bad is your choice).

3rd edition and before aren't played much, but you might want to use them if you want an old school cyberpunk feel, with cyberdecks the size of skateboards and wired connections to everything.

### Rules

There's a lot of crunch. This is a very rules heavy game. There are a few schools of thought on how to take this, but the most important rule for all of them is ***READ THE GODDAMN BOOK.*** Like, three times. You're the GM, you should have the best rules knowledge of the group.

Once players decide what kind of character they want to make, have them read up on the rules relevant to their profession. The mage should know how to cast a spell, and the decker should know how to steal a file from a commlink. I know it's hard to get players to read, but the world is so vast and involved that taking the time to explain what they can do and how it works will slow the game down tremendously. Some say to let the players remind you of the relevant rules, but I find they tend to "forget" penalties they're supposed to take for certain actions.

Also, be prepared to house rule a lot. Especially in 5th edition, but in all, there's a lot of contradictory rules, topics that aren't covered, straight dumb ones (look at the vehicular crash rules in the core for an example), and some that are so layered and weird they're almost impossible to put into play. This is another great reason to know the rules well. The mechanics of the game are actually pretty simple, and knowing the basic formula (attribute+skill/attribute) will let you make better calls on the fly, and make up new rules that suit your group's playstyle.

## BOOKS

There's a lot. Grab them from the pastebin (http://pastebin.com/SsWTY7qr). Even some of the older books. There's a lot of worldbuilding that hasn't been published in the last couple editions, like Corporate Enclaves, which gets into the work culture of each of the AAAs, and what they were/are working on.

That being said, and this goes for running any published setting, don't worry so much about being accurate. No one is running THE OFFICAL SHADOWRUN™ setting. Not even the devs. It's all about your version of the world. If it's one where Lofwyr is on the ropes, and SK is sitting at #10, about to lose AAA status, go for it. Story above all. And in the very rare event a player calls you out on it, tell them this is your version, and if they don't like it, they can run their own game.

## SWITCHING BETWEEN WORLDS/SPOTLIGHT TIME

This is one of the hardest things to do, and really, the only answer is practice. The party gets split a lot more in Shadowrun than most TTRPGs, which makes the ability to know when to cut away a much more important skill. Personally, I like to leave one player or group of players with something to solve while I work with the next player/group. For example:

"…and as you turn the corner, you see at the far end of the hall the security elevator you're looking for. In front of it are a security guard and a mechanic repairing a BaristaBot fantically. The receptionist is much closer to you, occupied by their MeFeed. Meanwhile, Decker, you just entered the host…"

## DESIGNING A CAMPAIGN

There's a couple ways to do this. You can do a completely episodic campaign, with unrelated runs throughout. This works great if not everyone can make it to a given game, or if it's played sporadically.

If you want to do a longer form campaign, figure out what your story is. Say Wuxing wants a piece of that Denver action. After the runners get their attention somehow (rep, fixer connection, backstory) they'll hire the runners to start putting plans into motion. The runners might not be the only ones involved, but they'll likely have the same Johnson throughout as a relationship builds. Of course, mix it up with some unrelated runs in between story runs until you reach the climax of the story. Generally, you'll want to aim for a shorter story, around 14 runs or less. Be sure to weave in the character's backstories and contacts, and the darkness that lurks in the boardroom!

The first mission is traditionally Food Fight, the Sixth's World's version of "You all meet in a tavern". However, there are a lot of setups you can use. Perhaps they're all part of a Suicide Squad deal, or you're jumping into an established team. They could all be arrested, and bailed out by a fixer whose last team found themselves buried somewhere in Glow City.

## THE WORLD:

## WORLD TONE

Everyone's world is a little different. Some focus more on the necessary evil that everyone must endure to survive. Some highlight just how few wageslaves actually know about what goes on outside their corporate homes. Others show how many people are willing to give up freedom for the security provided by a mega. And sometimes it's just how bizarre the world is. Find what you want to focus on, and highlight it with the runs you give your players in the campaign.

## PINK MOHAWK/BLACK TRENCHCOAT

This is a dichotomy that you'll see tossed around even in the rulebooks. Don't feel like you have to stick to one or another. You might find your group really enjoys taking the time to plan out everything in advance, or they just want to play Fast and the Furious in the future. Usually it's somewhere in-between. Sometimes you'll even switch between runs, or certain players will want to be more pink mohawk than others. At that point, you've just got to know your players well enough to be able to find the balance that makes everyone happy.

## NPCS

NPCs are the most important part of worldbuilding in any game, and in Shadowrun they're even more important. With the million people they'll come across on their adventures, and each players contacts, you'll want to keep a lot of notes. One great trick is to keep a list of names with one physical quirk and one behavioral quirk. Then, when the players suddenly take an interest in the talismonger they're talking to, you can just fill in next to "Thomas "Fry" Gershwin, dwarf with obnoxious mustache, stutters" that he's the owner of whatever shop they're in. When the party returns, you'll know who he is, and it will feel like a more complete and stable world.

Contacts are very important for this. Players call them all the time, but don't forget contacts can call them and ask for favors too. One contact might call (in the middle of a run!) to ask the character to help him move out of his old place because last week he got the group access codes for the facility they needed to get into. They could even give secondary objectives for runs. "Hey, Slick, I hear you're in the Triad boss's house. His goons stole my motorcycle a while back, if you can get it, I'd appreciate it!"

## MR. JOHNSON

Mr. Johnson is one of the identifying aspects of Shadowrun. One important thing to remember is why Mr. Johnson has to come to runners for his job. They're going to be handing a bunch of money to a group of criminals, enough money that you have to seriously consider the job. Runners aren't getting paid 10k each to locate Mr. Johnson's lost dog. They might be paid that much to recover the datadog that has the location of the fountain of youth. Also, it might not actually be Mr. Johnson's dog in the first place. Not that he'd tell you that.

Also think about how Johnson presents himself. Sometimes they'll want to make it clear they're coming from the Mafia, or they're just some wealthy fuck that acts like he's seen on the trids. Why might they want the runners to know? Maybe as a sort of intimidation, or because they'll likely find out on the course of the run anyway. Maybe to show what kind of favors they can offer. It could even be a front. Wuxing might want you to think the run is coming from Ares for some reason.

I couldn't finish this section about Mr. Johnson without betrayals. Somehow they've gotten the reputation of being common in the shadows, but if you try this on your players, they likely won't take a job from any Mr. Johnson again. Instead, a good middle is that Johnson will betray the players given a chance, but those chances aren't common. I mean, would you try to steal 50k from a bunch of hardened criminals you just send to assassinate the other guy jockeying for the promotion at work? By this point, they most likely know who you are, and are coming to the meet armed. Is it worth it? Maybe, if you HAVE to cover up loose ends. But most them will keep quiet if they want to keep their jobs.

## RUN STRUCTURE

This kind of mixes in with Mr. Johnson. Why is this a job you need shadowrunners to do? What is happening in the world outside the run? Why does Mitsuhama want the Yakuza boss's daughter? What happens if the runners get caught? Might they get hired (with the payment being their lives) to backstab Mr. Johnson? It's important to know, because things WILL go off the rails, and something will happen that you didn't expect. You have to know what's happening next, regardless if the runners succeed or fail.

Security is also something to think about. Tailor the level of security to the area. A ganger hideout probably won't have more than a couple thugs at the door, maybe a security camera that was there before they took over. An Aztechnology server farm office might have a keycard at the door for employees (with some live guards), but require an iris scanner for the 12 people allowed into the server room itself (with motion sensors on the floors incase someone finds another way in). Turrets aren't kept in any area where a bunch of employees would pass through, because of the chances of something going wrong because Jim forgot his lanyard today. They might be exposed for the intimidation factor, or kept hidden as a surprise. Certain keycodes or cards might not work after a designated time.

## THE MATRIX

A common question is "What does the matrix actually look like?" Well, Data Trails gets into it a bit, but I'll do my best to paint a picture for ya, chummer.

*Let's say you're wiz kid Timmy Thorton, logging in to play Call of Duty: Amazonia. You plug your data jack to your commlink, which has a sim module you got for 50¥ at Best Buy. Reality fades around you, and you find yourself in a white room, not unlike the one in the Matrix. Of course, you can tailor this loading screen to whatever theme you want, usually matching your icon. It might looks like a jungle, or the deck of a pirate ship. Around you there's icons for various things you own, and a couple big ones, your grids. Timmy's parents are living a middle lifestyle, so they have access to the Seattle grid, Emerald City. He can't access it outside Seattle, but that doesn't matter much. It's still better than that shithole public grid, which looks like Second Life, and is so crowded with spam he lags like crazy. You walk to the door with the Emerald City logo, and enter. Now, ahead of you, is a more fantastical (and cleaned up) city of Seattle, with a green sky, and several planets of all shapes and sizes in the sky. These are hosts, and they look like whatever the creator wants them to. In the Shadowrun world, net neutrality is not a thing, so hosts have to pay the grid provider to be accessible on any given grid. If you were on Renraku's grid, you wouldn't be able to access Horizon's Movie Theater Experience host. Different grids will look different when you log on too. Horizon looks like the California beach, with the hosts being the boats and shops along the boardwalk. Aztec's host is the ancient city of Tenochtitlan, with the big Azzie host pyramid in the middle, and a jungle in the distance that you can't ever quite reach. Details for a few are in Data Trails.*

*You fly on up to the CoD:A host (physics only means what the host/grid provider wants it to), which looks like a troll head with a military issue helmet and some badass scarring. You exchange marks with it to get entry. Marks look like whatever, but it's best to think of them as tiers of access. One mark is guest account, two is user, and three is admin. You are dropped into the middle of the Amazonian jungle, and get the full 5 senses experience: the wet, humid air, the smell of the dirt and plants, the sound of creatures and gunfire in the distance. You run into the conflict, and get some shots off, but there's a guy on the other team moving much faster than you. Not to be outdone, Timmy flips on his hot sim module he got from a senior in his geometry class. The senses are even more powerful now, and everything seems to be moving slightly slower. It's just the edge he needs to beat out that damn Azzie jaguar guard! After a few headshots on the drekhead, Timmy starts getting immense pain throughout his body, feeling like it's on fire. He can't breathe! He forces himself to jack out, taking dumpshock. When he gets back to the real world, he sees the front of his shirt is stained with blood trailing from his nose and ears. Good thing he caught it quick! Because he was in hot sim, that decker could have killed him with data spikes. Cold sim keeps you safe chummer, even if you're a little slower.*

One thing to keep in mind when running the matrix is noise. Generally, unless a decker is plugged into a device, they'll be taking a least a little noise. There's also patrol IC in hosts making Matrix Perception checks every few rounds (depending on the size of the host), ready to conjure up some more damaging IC if they see something shady. And of course, you can't forget OS and GOD. There's plenty to keep the matrix interesting on runs.

It's tempting to give the bad guys a lot of spiders working for them, but one important thing to remember is the cost of decks. The cheapest one is still almost 50,000¥. That's already more than most vehicles in the game. High security facilities will have a couple, but gangers more likely have a modded commlink, if anything at all. Make sure you grant them appropriate rarity and security.

## MAGIC

Magic is generally the simpler system. Remember that spirits can be pretty scary fast (immunity to weapons is a big thing), and if destroyed, the mage who summoned them is notified. Spirits also are sentient creatures, with thoughts, feelings, and opinions (especially on their summoner), which is something a group might be able to work with.

Background counts are also something to keep in mind, as most mages will take a penalty (usually between -1 and -3) outside their lodge, because of the ambient emotions of the sprawl around them. Even a bar will get aspected by the mages who frequent there. Big events can aspect the area around them quite suddenly, so a black mage who uses fear to power his spells might do well to build a fearsome reputation by eviscerating victims, but a hermetic would take a penalty for the same thing (but would get bonuses casting rituals at a magical school).

Mages are pretty rare in the world. Most numbers point at 1% of all metahumans are awakened, but the math doesn't quite work out for that. What's more important is how frequently your players will encounter magic users, which is fairly frequently. If you have any magic ability in the Sixth World, you're getting a job from it. No one working in human resources has an iota of magic in their blood. Most end up working security/military, entertainment (including professional sports), magical research, or as criminals. Note how many of those groups shadowrunners are likely to encounter.

## SINS

Fake SINs are something every runner should have. If they don't, they're liable to get stopped by drones as soon as they leave the barrens and detained until an officer can come by and see what's up. This can be fun for players; who is this fake ID? A private detective, with a license for concealed carry and certification to inspect crime scenes? A dentist with a pilot's license for the weekends he takes his little Cessna C750 out? A technomancer spider for a nearby AA?

Actual SINs via the quality can present some interesting challenges for a player. One thing that helps them out is that information sharing is basically nonexistent. Knowledge is power, and no mega will give up power without getting something in return. If you're a NeoNet citizen, and a Lone Star officer scans your SIN, they'll just get the all clear, here's the licenses they have. The bare minimum to do their jobs and confirm you aren't SINless or someone else. If you're on NeoNet turf though and get scanned, they have your WHOLE dossier. Birthday, biosamples, shopping habits, past employment, where you've been, medical history, all of it.

SINs aren't commonly granted, but it's not out of the question. If you ace a job interview at Evo, they'll give you one if you're SINless, or transfer yours over from wherever you were before. The PCC grants them to whoever buys a residential share (but doesn't allow dual citizenship). You might also be tagged with a criminal SIN by the arresting body if you do something that puts you in jail, or at least warrants the effort to track you.

## BUILDING CHARACTERS:

### TYPES OF CHARGEN

Pick the one that your group likes the best. In 5th edition, Karmagen gives more generalized characters, life module isn't too different but helps flesh out character's backstory more, and priority/Sum to 10 are default for SR5. BP build is the most popular choice for SR4A. Chummer makes the math easier for both editions (https://github.com/chummer5a/chummer5a/releases/latest For 5th edition, http://www.chummergen.com/ for 4th.)

Most RPGs encourage a good amount of specialization. The fighter needs to max out their strength and do enough damage to split a castle in half by level 5, the wizard needs to have an IQ of 329, and the bard needs to be able to fuck the queen in front of the king and convince the king he didn't. While specialization is still very important in Shadowrun, it's also important to be something of a generalist, because of the way the parties split frequently. Sure, you can make a troll that can take rocket launcher shots with nary a scratch, but if they stand out like a sore thumb socially (see: Etiquette), can't sneak a little, or spot anything around them, and insist on carrying all their best gear all the time to maintain that bonus, what you have is a great Plan B who will always ensure you have to use Plan B. Not only that, but they'll STILL get knocked out quick because of magic, stun batons, naroject, or a million other things they won't be able to handle because they spent 100k¥ on armor and half their karma on Body.

### SKILLS

Every runner should have a ranged skill, a melee skill, Etiquette, and Perception. Etiquette in particular is interesting, and something the GM should make use of frequently. The ability to socially blend in is often overlooked in games, but given the world, there's a lot of places where runners will find themselves somewhat out of place, and have to learn to make small talk at the water cooler about last Sunday's Neil the Ork Barbarian, or trying not look like a cop at a Triad mahjong parlor, or even just remembering not to ask Mr. Johnson for more money after the job is complete. If one of your players is about to make a social error, at least give them the chance to roll Etiquette to get out of it. Just because your player doesn't know something doesn't mean their character doesn't.

Knowledge skills are also important. Encourage your players to pick ones that help flesh out their character more than what would be "useful". Paracritter knowledge seems useful, but Combat Biker knowledge might be better if it lets you smooth talk the bouncer into letting your crew into Dante's Inferno's VIP room. That bouncer might even become a contact! Speaking French might not seem that important in Seattle compared to Japanese or Orzet, but it'll likely grant you a boost to your negotiations with the French native selling you reagents (ask any bilingual person you know, it works!), and you'll be the only one that doesn't have to shell out for a shitty linguisoft if you get hired to steal the Mona Lisa. Of course, it goes without speaking that as GM, you should help make them relevant.

### TECHNOMANCERS

Unfortunately, in 5th edition, technomancers generally suck. Not only that, but they are ridiculously complicated to play, and hard to build right. Even at best, they're glass cannons. My personal rule at my table is that you don't get to play one until you've played a decker at the very least. Without a solid understanding of the matrix rules, players won't know what their living persona does, how to use sprites to their full effectiveness, or which complex forms to take. Be prepared to make several house rules for this class.